

BODY AS BATTLEGROUND: THE POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN IN THE NARRATIVES OF MAHASWETA DEVI

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ABSTRACT

Woman comes as major marginalised category among the subaltern groups as she is gendered and suffers exploitation. Patriarchy controls and coordinates her by dominating her body. The very politics of gender begins with woman's body. In the light of post-colonialism the rate of domination is socio-political. Cartelism is an added factor where gender dominations are overtly carried through woman's body. The present essay tries to explore the marginality of women especially low class / caste women in the postcolonial society in the backdrop of few narratives of Mahasweta Devi.

KEYWORDS: *Gender, Marginalisation, Cartelism, Domination*

INTRODUCTION

Woman shares a common platform with subaltern groups with certain degree of marginality. In fact, she forms largest group of subalterns. Marginality of woman in its usual performances is placed as common woman experience. The total degree of oppression will be laid upon the large group which is generally treated as homogeneous group. Woman's question cannot be dealt without tags of caste, class and so on. In an Indian context woman's specificity with class and caste stand crucial.

Being a postcolonial writer, Mahasweta Devi tries to explore the socio-political strategies that take over the gender issues. She tries to expose violence and assaults against women are configured in socio-political frames which would result in community orientation towards welfare in general. Though the female characters stay fixed to caste and class specificities, the third wave of feminism undergoes a major shift in its perception of marginality. To come to terms with the marginality specifically in the context of rapes, assaults, victimization like prostitution where woman's body is highly targeted and used is the motivation of the post-feminist approaches. Here woman's body is theorised of sociological outlook. The woman's body is used not only for satisfying sexual desires but also for avenging the caste and class enmities. Intersecting woman's body with economic motive is another dimension. Hence woman's body remains an important strategy in the patriarchal power operations.

Western feminism of large universalizing woman's identity is rejected in the narratives of Mahasweta Devi. Other than submissive females, there is a wide variety of women (like Dopdi) in her narratives. Mahasweta Devi always says that she is not a feminist. But her works inclusive of woman's marginality show that she explores the differences in woman's being pertaining to her socio-cultural context. Also, she believes that because of her physicality woman is more subjugated.

Women characters in Mahasweta Devi are from lower castes. They serve as labourers (most of the times bonded labourers). Moreover, they rise from feudal society. They are controlled and regulated by the feudal master in all respects. Their bodies are highly controlled. Instead of cultural codes like widowhood etc they suffer with physical assaults and rapes. Research scholar Usher A observes,” She (Mahasweta Devi) does not regard women as a separate entity but treats their subordination as linked to “the oppressions of class and caste” (p.52). In the foreword essay in ‘Rudali’ Anjum Katyal emphasizes the same as: “Mahasweta Devi is firm in rejecting the idea that the text could be especially identified with women in any way, since gender is subsumed into the discourse of class”. Katyal says that ‘the trajectory of the central character is towards agency’. Almost all Mahasweta Devi’s novels opted here represent women with social specificities. Gender runs along with these specificities. In ‘Dolouti, the Bountiful’, Douloti being a Crook’s daughter, is specified as a ‘harijan’, daughter of a kamiya. So BrhaminParamanada anticipates a future kamiya in her. Douloti becomes kamiya prostitute, who lends service to her master through prostitution. Lachima is a pledged labourer. She has bound to caste. So, she has no escape from the situation. This shows that different paradigms applied to Mahasweta Devi’s women. She rejects singular manifestations.

- The woman in my selected narratives of Mahasweta Devi can be represented as follows:
- Douloti-Harijan(low caste female)+low class(economically marginalized)—subaltern
- Sanichari- ganju (low caste female) +low class (economically marginalized)—subaltern
- Lachima-Barbar(low caste female) + low class (economically marginalized)—subaltern
- Rukmani (low caste female) + low class (economically marginalized)—subaltern
- Prostitutes-(generally of low caste) + low class (economically marginalized)—subalterns
- These women have no domestic lives of their own. They ought to serve masters with their service including body offering.

The postcolonial understanding of woman’s body as the centre of ideological encounters implies an invariable split between body and mind. The fissured understanding according to postcolonial theorists, is nothing but making subjects subaltern considering them as only bodies since subaltern body in a postcolonial situation-‘doubly assaulted’. The dialect of body and mind is well translated as rationality and sexual applications. If man is all rational, woman is body. So, she has been reduced to body losing rationale of rationality. On the contrary man is produced with physic as well as mind

Differentiating bodies into sexually modified things may be abstract. But the patriarchal notions of male and female bodies are well defined. They are accepted as codes. Female without the analogy of male body is hardly realized. The female body is constructed as not being a male body.

The ideal stereotype of masculinity draws manly virtues as will power, sexual virility, courage, adventurism, independence. Either male or female physical features count. The body is suggestive of manliness. This physical fitness assures the will power of the male

This physical fitness assures the will power of the male including his moral back up. Against this masculine beauty is ugliness of the ‘others’.

Woman's body becomes the battle ground of power. It strongly exposes sexual stereotypes and imagery. It is generally portrayed feminine as passive and masculine as active. Hegemonic masculine ideals are protecting sexual stereotypes. In feudal set up, masculinity is an essential characteristic feature. Masculinity is translated into muscle power and sexual fitness. Excess of sexual desire can prove one man as more virulent, macho among his community. Macho is generally appreciated in the patriarchal society. Within the framework of family norms, a male can survive himself as a father figure, master. The patriarchal ego can be satisfied with illegal relations.

Rudali is a typical example of projected male ego in a society. The masters are judged as competent macho figures only when they keep a greater number of prostitutes. The range of assessment may be hyperbolic, but no one ever questioned the falsity in the system. The sharing of his potency with other women can be taken as signs of his masculinity. Boosting performances from the side of men are always considered with his manly power. The landowning community people live up to the established standards of androcentric social order. They claim to show off their manliness in their respective societies. This forms a collective masculine identity in the society. On the contrary, the low castes and the bonded slaves are turned out to be children in this power patriarchy (tempted to call them as Sisus (one of the titles of Mahasweta Dev's Short stories). Their manliness is utterly hyphenated in the system where they live. They become wretched human beings. On the contrary, woman's body is fragile and beautified. This womanly body has a general appreciation. Indeed, it is activated among men. The canons of beauty themselves are designed by a kind of male orientation. In the upper caste males, the sense of male virility is obviously inherited. Illegal relations are no trespassing acts in society. In fact, more and more they virulent, more they are projected as virulent man.

Men are proud enough of their sexual potency. Before the great magnum of the master powers, they offer themselves. Their wives have been used by the masters. Sometimes, their body is not under the control of themselves. It is coordinated and controlled by the master figures. Lachima, in Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh, suffers under Medinisingh. Her body is mortgaged to master on a condition that she can be married only when the master gets bored of her body. Until his interest in her body gets decreased, she should wait. So does Lachima. As a result, she lost her interest in marriage. She could not even express her sorrow before others. When once she asked about her liberation, the master thrashed her, scolded using obscene words.

Wish fulfilment is one of the manly acts. In the story of Douloti, the Bountiful the Contractor Lathia is a good example of this type. He regularly takes Aswagandhichoorna to enhance his manly power. Like a wild animal, he used to attack the girls. If they get ruptured by his act, his ego gets satisfied duly with his male action. The tattered Dolouti being naked, when suffers with bruises made by sex, looks helpless victim against male body power. This depiction of Dolouti is what Mahasweta Devi trying to slit the male pervasiveness. She exposes the sexual domain of the men, approved by the power structures of men only. Moral binding to marriage and family is not the value of the male. The woman has to keep the sacred relationship in such situations. Including property rights, male is benefited with his life style. Mahasweta gives an ironic punch to his masculinity as follows:

- He's really taken by you.
- Who?

- Latiaji.
- What has been taken?
- His mind.
- Mind?
- Dolouti was most surprised. The lust-struck animal that digs and tears her every day, he has a mind? (Imaginary Maps, p.61)

In Douloti, the bountiful, abortion is explained with examples of prostitutes for whom abortion becomes fatal. Douloti is one of the victims of abortion. Rampiyari has given previous examples as, "... She got a belly in two months. I dosed her. But the medicine was strong. On the third day passing blood like water. I ran to the medicine man. ..The girl died" (Ibid).

In Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh the girl Rukmani becomes the victim of abortion. These abortions occur to women who generally stay victims to the males, especially masters.

As mentioned above, the third world feminism tries to explore the cruel sides of women's lives as prostitutes. Lower caste women are more likely to fall into the trap of prostitution in the caste based societies like India. It is because the true subaltern subjects are perceived only with reference to their bodies. The materialist expansion in employing body focus is obvious. Gendered bodies have more extension in this regard. Subaltern women are relegated to their bodies; as service bodies. The service has no boundaries. Among many services, offering bodies is one such job. Whether married or unmarried, this service continues without major restraints. Submissiveness through body is deciding the rate of marginality in lower caste women. Low caste women are treated by upper caste males as bodies. In most cases, their submissiveness proves unconscious act; they could not distinguish themselves about this act. In the feudal set up, a low caste woman's body is taken for granted. The 'use' of woman's body is excessively exercised by the upper caste males. Mahasweta Devi dissects the problem of chastity as a severe victimization of low caste women. Medinisingh for instance, does not allow Lachima to marry even after serving him so long a period. Men married or unmarried can enjoy sexual pleasure in this system. Body offering is intact with the lifestyle of the lower women. The moral codes operate at different level. Mahasweta gives the detail that when the upper caste lords slept with lower caste women; they lit the lights, as they should not see the faces of those women!

The women from low castes are made prostitutes as far as they are fertile; and their bodies can be usable. After exhausting, they are made beggars. "Did'ma said, "Whores die to be as happy as householders? Whores die when their bodies break. If they're careful, they live. And the ones who aren't, they go begging at Kalighat. Die on the streets" (Bedanabala. Her Life, Her Times, p.35-6)

The fun making men are obviously distinguished from the women folk who lose their fitness and health soon after entering into the profession. Mahasweta Devi dissects the problem of chastity as a severe victimization of low caste women.

Mahashweta Devi expressed in one of her interviews that a woman in the poorer class suffers because of her class, her body. It does not mean that all Mahashweta Devi's stories uphold gender bias in full length. Since it is one of the major perspectives of Mahashweta, it was expressed well in her Breast story that how a woman's body exploited extravagantly.

The postcolonial search for woman's agency lies in the kind of degraded lives of prostitutes. Sociologically prostitute category is conditioned with violence and degradation. The women categories of housewives and prostitutes is a clear cut divide. In the running narratives of women, the divide shapes two distinct kinds of women, establishing two kinds of moral codes. In prostitution, (women's) bodies do get focused as objects or commodities. The highly conditioned satisfaction motto is one sided and the question of agency can be raised at this point.

Mahasweta Devi creates many Prostitutes who are victimized mainly because of their body. Claiming body as their only potency to live, these women's being is tagged with greater exploitation. As the author suggests, "Whore, slut, prostitute so many names Neither society nor the women had yet perceived them as insults From one kingdom to another, one age to another, even one language to another....if one counted all their names, they would perhaps add up to no less than a few million"(Bedanabala. Her Life, Her Times, p.10)Mani in Bedanabala, Her Life Her Times sighed and say, for new tastes. New flavours. No one calls them sinners after all. That name is kept for us" (Bedanabala. Her Life, Her Times, p.17)

Bedanabala, Her Life Her Times, deals with the house of the prostitutes in Calcutta. Their lives are recorded in police stations. When once their names are registered in the Police registers, they are doomed to die as prostitutes. They did not even have property rights during British period.

The life of the prostitute is always marginalized by the mainstream. General social codes may not apply to the prostitute women. The value system is also different. If the Scriptures are the major operating tools of patriarchy, which controls the lives of the household women, Mahasweta records another control point that controls the lives of the Prostitutes. It is PatitPurana which regulates the lives of the prostitutes. "All that (The PatitaPuran) does is convince you that women are, since the moment of their births, no more than bundles of sin" (Bedanabala. Her Life, Her Times, p.17). This is in accordance with male dominated society. There is an instance in 'Bedanabala.Her Life Times, there is a special kind of marriage for prostitutes where they have to marry to a blade (To this blade of iron I know I marry youEverybody's woman. Alone no more- a song usually sung during a prostitute's marriage).

Mahasweta exposes another kind of bonded labour special to women. In Douloti, the Bountiful women are made 'kamiyas'or bonded labourers letting their bodies to earn money to meet the loans paid to them or to their parents 'The social system that makes Crook Nagesia a kamiya is made by men. Therefore,Douloti, Somni, Reotihave to quench the hunger of male flesh. Otherwise Paramanadna does not get money".Douloti is one such kamiya-kamiya whore, who serves as bonded prostitute for three hundred and fifty rupees loan. The song generally sung among the folk as follows:

- Field work, digging soil, cutting wells is work
- This one doesn't do it, that one doesn't do it, the
- Other one doesn't do it.
- The boss has turned them into land
- The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises the crop

Theresa M.Senft observes "Spivak uses a Marxist analysis to argue that capital works to create at least three categories of people: bosses, workers, and slaves. Spivak includes the bonded labourers in 'Douloti' in the slave class Spivak argues that unlike the bonded labourer, the bonded prostitute does not sell labour, but rather, she sells her own

body. In this way, she is twice alienated from capital: First, she does not control the price of her “goods”, and second, she produces no good to begin with. This alienation of the bonded prostitute from her own body is causes Spivak to argue that although both “women and men are –collectively connected to this regulative logic of loans, the woman’s body is apart, it is elsewhere”.

Mahaswetha Devi is trying to show the degraded sexualities. When in a postcolonial context, the woman’s body is ruptured, torn and violently assaulted. Moreover it is used for economic fulfilment. The sex labourer role in the narratives of Mahaswetha Devi is devastated.

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